The Ninth Commandment

Exodus 20:16

Study

This chapter examines the Ninth Commandment, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Exodus 20:16), exploring its theological foundations, its broader implications for truthfulness in all of life, and its enduring relevance for the people of God. The commandment was first given in the context of Israel's legal system, where a lying witness could send an innocent man to his death or allow a guilty man to walk free. That alone should tell us how seriously God regards the truth. But as we follow this commandment through the whole of Scripture, we see that its reach extends far beyond the courtroom. It touches every conversation, every relationship, and every setting in which we open our mouths. Slander, gossip, flattery, and deception in any form all fall under the ninth commandment’s far-reaching prohibition.

Our study examines the biblical foundation of truthfulness, grounded in the character of God Himself, who is identified throughout Scripture as the God of truth, and in whose image His people are called to reflect that truthfulness in their speech. Our study demonstrates that the Ninth Commandment requires not only that we reject falsehood but that we actively pursue and defend the truth. It teaches us that we should speak well of our neighbor’s good name and guard the reputation of others as carefully as we would guard our own. Our review of the commandment concludes with practical applications for believers living in a culture that is increasingly indifferent to or opposed to truth, calling us to be people whose speech is characterized by honesty, integrity, and love.

Introduction

The Ninth Commandment addresses one of the most common and destructive sins known to humanity: the misuse of speech. “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Exodus 20:16) is a command that strikes at the very heart of human relationships, for trust between people depends upon truthful communication. When truth is abandoned, relationships crumble, justice is perverted, and society itself begins to unravel. It is no accident that Scripture has so much to say about the tongue and its power, for as James reminds us, “The tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire!” (James 3:5). With his characteristic sharpness, Thomas Watson wrote, “God has set two natural fences to keep in the tongue, the teeth and lips; and this commandment is a third fence set about it, that it should not break forth into evil.”[1]

In the original setting of this commandment, the concern was the integrity of Israel’s legal system. In ancient Israel, as in most societies then and now, the administration of justice depended upon the truthfulness of witnesses. A false witness could send an innocent person to death or allow a guilty person to escape punishment. The seriousness of this is reflected in Deuteronomy 19:18-19, which prescribes that a false witness must receive the punishment that would have been inflicted upon the accused: “If the witness is a false witness and has accused his brother falsely, then you shall do to him as he had meant to do to his brother.” This principle of proportional justice teaches us how seriously God regards the corruption of truth in matters of judgment.

Yet the commandment reaches well beyond the courtroom. As the Westminster Shorter Catechism summarizes, the Ninth Commandment “requireth the maintaining and promoting of truth between man and man, and of our own and our neighbor’s good name, especially in witness-

[1] Watson, *Ten Commandments*, 169.

bearing."[2] The scope of this commandment, therefore, encompasses all of our speech, demanding that we use our words to build up rather than tear down, to honor God's truth rather than serve our own selfish interests.

The God of Truth

The foundation of the Ninth Commandment rests upon the character of God Himself. God is truth. We need to understand that this is not one attribute among many, but a defining characteristic of His very being. Jesus declared, "I am the way, and the ***truth***, and the life" (John 14:6). The Holy Spirit is called "the ***Spirit of truth***" (John 16:13). The psalmist proclaims, "The sum of your word is truth, and every one of your righteous rules endures forever" (Psalm 119:160). Because God is truth, He cannot lie (Titus 1:2; Hebrews 6:18), and every word that proceeds from His mouth is completely trustworthy.

Since we are created in the image of God, we are called to reflect His truthfulness in our own speech and conduct. When we lie, it is not just a violation of a moral rule. We do damage to the image of God within us and align ourselves with the devil, whom Jesus identified as "a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44). There is a spiritual dimension to every act of deception. Lying is ultimately satanic in origin, for it was through the serpent's lie in the Garden that sin and death entered the world. "Did God actually say?" (Genesis 3:1) was the first recorded instance of bearing false witness, and its consequences have been seen in every generation since.

Watson observed that "Lying is a sin that doth not go alone; it is accompanied with many other sins. It is accompanied by atheism; one who tells lies does, in effect, deny that there is a God of truth."[3] This is a sobering reminder that dishonesty is not a trivial matter. It strikes at the very foundation of our relationship with God. Those who practice falsehood

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[2] *The Westminster Shorter Catechism* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1981), Q. 77.

[3] Watson, *Ten Commandments*, 170.

place themselves in opposition to the One who has revealed Himself as the God who keeps His promises and whose holy Word never fails.

The Meaning of the Commandment

The Hebrew text of the Ninth Commandment uses the phrase *lo' ta'aneh bere'akha 'ed sheqer*, which translates literally as "You shall not answer against your neighbor as a witness[4] of falsehood."[5] The word "answer" ('aneh) indicates formal testimony, the kind given in a court of law when one is called upon to give an account. The word for "witness" ('ed) is the standard term for one who testifies in legal proceedings. And the word "falsehood" (sheqer) denotes deliberate deception, not merely a mistake or misunderstanding, but willful dishonesty.

In Israel's legal system, the testimony of witnesses was essential to the administration of justice. Deuteronomy 17:6 required that "on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses the one who is to die shall be put to death; a person shall not be put to death on the evidence of one witness." The requirement of multiple witnesses served as a safeguard against false accusations, but it also placed enormous responsibility on those who testified. To bear false witness was to participate in a perversion of justice and potentially to condemn the innocent to death.

The story of Naboth's vineyard in 1 Kings 21 provides a vivid illustration of the deadly consequences of false witness. When King Ahab coveted Naboth's vineyard, Queen Jezebel came up with a scheme in which two false witnesses accused Naboth of blasphemy and treason. On the basis of their lying testimony, Naboth was stoned to death, and Ahab seized his property. This event demonstrates how false witness can serve as a weapon of

[4]The Hebrew word *'ed* (עד) means "witness" and carries the sense of one who testifies or bears testimony regarding what he has seen, heard, or knows. The related word *'edut* (עדות) is the term used for the "testimony" inscribed on the tablets of the law, underscoring the covenantal significance of truthful witness.

[5]The Hebrew *sheqer* (שֶׁקֶר) denotes falsehood, deception, or that which is vain and empty. It describes speech or testimony that is deliberately contrary to the truth, not merely mistaken but willfully deceitful.

injustice, enabling the powerful to oppress the innocent. God’s response was swift and severe. Through the prophet Elijah, He pronounced judgment upon both Ahab and Jezebel, declaring, “In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth shall dogs lick your own blood” (1 Kings 21:19).

There is no doubt that the trial of Jesus provides the supreme example of false witness in Scripture. Spurgeon once observed, "God had a Son that had no fault, but He never had a son that was not found fault with. God Himself was slandered in paradise by Satan."[6] Mark 14:55-56 records, "Now the chief priests and the whole council were seeking testimony against Jesus to put him to death, but they found none. For many bore false witness against him, but their testimony did not agree." The Son of God, who is Himself the Truth, was condemned to death on the basis of manufactured testimony. The irony is very profound. The One who perfectly embodied absolute truth was destroyed by falsehood, yet through His death and resurrection, He secured the ultimate triumph of truth over every lie!

The Broader Scope: All Forms of Falsehood

While the Ninth Commandment has immediate implications for the judicial system, its application extends to every sphere of human communication. The Scriptures consistently condemn all forms of dishonesty, deception, and verbal abuse. Proverbs 6:16,19 lists among the things the Lord hates “a lying tongue” and “a false witness who breathes out lies.” Colossians 3:9 instructs believers, “Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices.” Ephesians 4:25 calls upon believers to “put away falsehood” and to “speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another.”

Slander is one of the most destructive forms of false witness. It involves deliberately making false and damaging statements about another person with the intent of destroying their reputation. The Hebrew word *rakhil* (

[6] C. H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students*, complete and unabridged ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1954), chap. 22, "The Blind Eye and the Deaf Ear."

רָכִיל), used in Leviticus 19:16, refers to one who goes about as a talebearer or slanderer: “You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people.” Slander is particularly evil because its damage is often irreparable. Once a person’s reputation has been destroyed by false or malicious speech, it is very difficult to restore.

J.C. Ryle wisely cautioned that “there is no sin that men so frequently commit as the sin of the tongue. Lying, slandering, backbiting, tale-bearing, flattering, and jesting are of daily occurrence.”[7] When we were children, many of us heard, and perhaps said, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names can never hurt me." This classic English-language children's rhyme was commonly used to dismiss verbal insults, often in response to bullying. The truth, however, is that words can and often do hurt people. Being lied about or slandered can significantly harm a person. Sometimes, emotional trauma from slander can far outweigh a physical injury! Proverbs 20:19 provides us with wisdom in these matters: “Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets; therefore, do not associate with a simple babbler.”[8]

Gossip is equally condemned in the Word of God. Gossip involves sharing information about others, whether true or false, in a way that is careless, unnecessary, or motivated by a desire to make oneself look better than someone else. Proverbs 16:28 warns, “A dishonest man spreads strife, and a whisperer separates close friends.” Proverbs 26:20 teaches, “For lack of wood the fire goes out, and where there is no whisperer, quarreling ceases.” The gossip may reveal that what they share is true, but the Ninth

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[7]J.C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: Matthew* (1856; repr., Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1986), 37.

[8]The Hebrew word translated 'babbler' (פֶּתִי, peti) carries the sense of one who is easily led into loose or careless talk, someone who cannot be trusted to guard the confidences of others. The broader context of the verse links this careless speech with slander, warning believers to avoid those whose tongues cause harm. The word is used 19 times in the Book of Proverbs.

Commandment is not only about factual accuracy. It is about using our speech in a way that honors God and serves the good of our neighbor.

Flattery is another subtle form of dishonesty condemned in Scripture. Flattery is insincere praise offered not for the benefit of the recipient but for the advantage of the one speaking. Proverbs 29:5 warns, “A man who flatters his neighbor spreads a net for his feet.” Unlike genuine encouragement, which builds others up in truth, flattery is just deception. It tells people what they want to hear rather than what they need to hear, and more often than not, it conceals selfish motives behind a disguise of kindness. As John Piper has noted, "Flattery is bad because it's calculated. It is given with a view to obtaining some advantage.”[9]

Half-truths and deliberate omissions are also violations of the Ninth Commandment. When we present partial information in a way designed to create a false impression, we are bearing false witness even though every word we speak may be technically accurate. The Westminster Larger Catechism recognizes this, listing among the sins that violate the Ninth Commandment “speaking the truth unseasonably, or maliciously to a wrong end, or perverting it to a wrong meaning, or in doubtful or equivocal expressions, to the prejudice of truth or justice.”[10] This is a high standard that challenges all of us to examine not only the content of our speech but also the manner and the motive behind it.

The Damage of False Witness

The consequences of bearing false witness are far-reaching and devastating. Being a false witness destroys trust. Human relationships are built upon the assumption that people mean what they say. When that assumption is broken by dishonesty, the results can be tragic. A spouse who

[9] John Piper, "How Do I Praise Others but Avoid Flattery?" Desiring God, accessed February 18, 2026, https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/how-do-i-praise-others-but-avoid-flattery.
[10] Westminster Assembly, *The Westminster Larger Catechism*, Q. 145 (1648).

discovers that their partner has been lying loses the foundation of trust upon which the marriage was built. A friend who learns that they have been the subject of gossip finds it difficult to maintain the friendship. A congregation that discovers its leaders have been deceptive loses confidence in their spiritual guidance. When trust is broken, it can be very difficult to restore.

Also, a false witness perverts justice. When witnesses lie in court, innocent people may be convicted, and guilty people may go free. When public figures running for office spread misinformation or outright lies, people are misled and democratic processes are compromised. When store owners deceive their customers, honest purchasing is undermined. The prophet Isaiah pronounced a woe upon “those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness” (Isaiah 5:20). Wherever truth is abandoned, injustice advances.

Additionally, false witness damages the reputation and well-being of others. Proverbs 25:18 declares, “A man who bears false witness against his neighbor is like a war club, or a sword, or a sharp arrow.” This imagery conveys the violent nature of dishonest speech. Words can wound as deeply as weapons. They can destroy careers, break up families, and drive people to despair. The psalmist cried out against those who “whet their tongues like swords, who aim bitter words like arrows” (Psalm 64:3). The pain inflicted by false or malicious words is not imaginary. It is real and often lasting.

Lastly, false witness offends God. Because God is truth, every lie is an affront to His character. Proverbs 12:22 states this very plainly, “Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord, but those who act faithfully are his delight.” The book of Revelation reveals the ultimate seriousness of falsehood by declaring that “all liars” will have their portion in the lake of fire (Revelation 21:8). This is not because lying is worse than every other sin, but because

persistent, unrepentant dishonesty reveals a heart that does not know God and has not been awakened by the truth of the gospel. Those who belong to the God of truth will increasingly reflect His truthfulness in their own lives.

Truth in the Age of Deception

We live in an age that has a deeply troubled relationship with truth. The rise of social media has created an environment in which misinformation spreads in nanoseconds.[11] News outlets are often perceived as biased, and public trust in various institutions has eroded significantly. The concept of "post-truth" has entered the cultural vocabulary, describing a condition in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief. In such an environment, the Ninth Commandment speaks with urgent relevance.

The digital age that we live in has brought new ways to bear false witness. Online anonymity makes people bold. They cast accusations and spread rumors without fearing any consequences. Social media lets lies spread like wildfire before anyone can set the record straight. And now, AI tools can create fake images or recordings that look totally real. Reputations can be trashed online in a flash, often based on nothing more than unverified claims. We can say that this is a modern twist on bearing false witness. The Old and New Testament writers could never have imagined the modern age, yet their timeless principles and understanding of the sinful heart remain as penetrating and relevant as ever.

Christians are not immune to these temptations. It is alarmingly easy to share an article without verifying its accuracy, to repeat a rumor without confirming its truth, or to make assumptions about others based on incomplete information. The speed of digital communication often outpaces our capacity for careful thought and discernment. Yet the Ninth Commandment calls us to a greater standard. Before we speak or type, we

[11] A nanosecond is one billionth of a second. Nanoseconds measure speeds in computing, like RAM, access times, or processor cycles.

must ask ourselves whether what we are about to communicate is true, necessary, and serves the good of our neighbor. If the answer to any of these questions is no, we should remain silent.

The Positive Duty: Speaking Truth in Love

As with all the commandments, the Ninth Commandment has both a negative and a positive dimension. It forbids falsehood, but it also requires truthfulness. Ephesians 4:15 calls believers to speak “the truth in love,” a passage that captures both the content and the manner of our speech. Truth without love can be harsh and destructive. Love without truth can be sentimental and misleading. The Christian is called to speak honestly and lovingly in every situation.

This positive duty includes defending our neighbor's good name. When someone is unjustly accused or when rumors circulate about a fellow believer, we have an obligation to speak up in their defense. Proverbs 31:8-9 instructs, “Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute. Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.” Standing for truth sometimes requires courage, especially when the tide of popular opinion runs against it. Yet the Christian is called to bear witness to what is right, even when doing so is costly.

This duty also includes truthful and honest self-examination. The Ninth Commandment not only governs what we say about others but also what we say about ourselves. Exaggeration, self-promotion, and the selective presentation of facts to make ourselves look better than we are all fall under the prohibition of this command. The apostle Paul modeled a different approach when he wrote to the Corinthians, “We have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God’s word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God” (2 Corinthians 4:2).

Honesty, humility, and sincerity are hallmarks of a life guided by the Ninth Commandment.

Application for the Church Today

How then should we live in light of the Ninth Commandment? One aspect of great importance is that we must commit ourselves to truthfulness in all our dealings. This means telling the truth even when it is inconvenient, even when it makes us look bad, and even when others may prefer to hear something different. It means refusing to participate in gossip, slander, or the spreading of unverified information. It means being honest in our business transactions, personal relationships, and public discourse.

Another aspect of being guided by this commandment is that we must guard other people's reputations. This requires us to think carefully before we speak, to give others the benefit of the doubt, and to refuse to pass along information that may be harmful or unverified. When we hear something negative about a fellow believer, our first instinct should not be to share it with someone else but to go directly to the person involved, following the pattern laid down by Christ in Matthew 18:15: "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone." This approach protects the dignity of the individual and preserves the unity of the body of Christ.

Sadly, it is possible to tell the truth in a way that is mean-spirited, self-serving, or needlessly hurtful. The Ninth Commandment calls us to a higher standard, one in which our words are governed not only by truth but by love, humility, and a genuine concern for the well-being of others. Ephesians 4:29 provides a searching standard: "Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear."

Lastly, we must recognize our own susceptibility to self-deception. Jeremiah 17:9 warns, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick;

who can understand it?" We are often the last to recognize our own dishonesty, whether it takes the form of rationalizing our behavior, minimizing our sins, or constructing a false image of ourselves for others to see. The remedy for self-deception is the Word of God, which Hebrews 4:12 describes as "living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart." Regular, prayerful engagement with Scripture exposes the deceptions of our own hearts and conforms us increasingly to the truth.

Conclusion

The Ninth Commandment calls the people of God to be people of truth. In a world full of deception, lies, half-truths, and misinformation, the Church is called to stand as a pillar and buttress of the truth (1 Timothy 3:15). We are to put away all falsehood and speak the truth with our neighbor, knowing that we are members of one another. We are to guard the reputation of others, defend the innocent, and refuse to participate in the destruction of another's good name. We are to examine our own hearts for dishonesty and submit ourselves continually to the refining work of God's Word and Spirit.

Ultimately, the Ninth Commandment points us to Christ, who is the Truth incarnate. At His trial, He stood silent as false witnesses condemned Him, bearing in His own body the penalty for our sins, including the lies and deceptions we have spoken against God and one another. In Jesus, we find both the standard of perfect honesty and the grace to grow more like Him.

"Give me understanding, that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart" (Psalm 119:34).